

Gothic Fertility:  
Reproductive Ecology and the Rise of the Milieu in Leonora Sansay's *Secret History* (1808)  
Abby L. Goode

Hemispheric American scholars tend to discuss space in a context of territorial geopolitics. But what happens if we reconsider territorial geopolitics through the lens of ecology? Leonora Sansay's *Secret History, or The Horrors of St. Domingo* (1808) offers a case study, one which unearths the ever-present ecological character of contested geopolitical territories in the West Indies. To this end, this paper focuses on the novel's various representations of fertility, from the narrator's fantasy of slave-based reproductive order to gothic images of overpopulation to the reproductive ecology of well-behaved land crabs. These representations of fertility reveal the novel's biopolitical unconscious—that it renders the island space as a milieu of transformable elements—underneath the narrator's conscious nostalgia for slave order and colonial domination. Reading this unconscious recasts the contested territory of Haiti—and by extension its neighboring islands—as an ecological milieu, a heterogeneous hothouse of interacting elements and events that escape and exceed the meticulous management of colonial power.

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In its first few pages, Leonora Sansay's *Secret History, or The Horrors of St. Domingo* (1808) offers up an odd botanical metaphor. Mary, Sansay's main narrator, observing the final days of French control in colonial Saint Domingue, describes the island as "formerly a garden" (70). She listens as creole women who "staid in the Island during the revolution" describe their misery and nostalgia for the days of a well-managed slave economy: "Every inhabitant lived on his estate like a Sovereign ruling his slaves with despotic sway, enjoying all that luxury could invent, or fortune procure" (70). Here Mary envisions order in the midst of war-ravaged Saint Domingue through the creole ladies' dream of the slave-holding past. And according to her account, this order looks like a well-tilled "garden," connoting organized cultivation, the careful, meticulous management of growth and fertility.<sup>1</sup> The "garden," in other words, represents a tightly controlled system of both production—with stakes in the fertility of slave bodies—and separation, a racial hierarchy that distinguishes white colonial subjects from slaves, seemingly quelling the possibility of racial amalgamation through reproductive control.

The metaphor of the "garden," however, portrays not only this reproductive control enforced in the heyday of Saint Domingue's slave system, but also the reproductive excess of the slave-owning creoles: "Gaming knew no bounds, and libertinism, called love, was without restraint. The Creole is...vain, inconstant, and incapable of serious application; and in this abode of pleasure the luxurious ease vices have reigned at which humanity must shudder" (70). For Sansay's narrator, this reproductive order, this "garden" of the slave-holding past, also strangely evokes a reproductive *disorder* that persists even in the revolutionary present of the novel.

Within the single image of the “garden,” we see the key tension the novel, between the appearance of reproductive control in colonial Saint Domingue and the reproductive excess of gothic creole libertinism. Through the narrative voices of Mary and her sister Clara, Sansay portrays revolutionary Saint Domingue and, by extension, its neighboring islands as a nightmare of poverty and filth, “choaked with rubbish,” “intolerable” heat, “detestable” streets where “at every step you sink ankle deep,” “beggars” that “fill the inhabitants with horror” and illegitimate, abandoned creole “children...exposed to perish in the street” (61, 63, 129, 66, 113). Such images of uncontrolled fertility, poverty, and treacherous living conditions populate the text’s haunting terrain, revealing what I call *gothic fertility*, an unruly reproduction that lacks human control, and that, left unchecked and unmanaged, brings about danger, despair, and even destruction. Gothic fertility, in the midst of revolution, threatens overpopulation and racial mixing, indeed the potential evaporation of racial boundaries. And while *Secret History* might subtly suggest that it is an effect of the slave rebellion—a rebellion that has supposedly ruptured reproductive order—the duality of the “garden” metaphor as both control and excess suggests that gothic fertility is more pervasive and inescapable than we think.

My emphasis on fertility foregrounds reproductive ecology as an overlooked yet significant element in the text, an element that has potentially far-reaching implications for how Americanists understand the construction of space and territory.<sup>2</sup> Critics have recently taken up Sansay’s text, locating it as a transatlantic, circum-Caribbean, and early American novel, analyzing its paracolonial character, hybrid formal qualities, and politics of race and gender.<sup>3</sup> Approaching *Secret History* as uniquely transnational, this burgeoning, lively work unanimously assumes a geopolitical context in which to frame the novel.<sup>4</sup> Yet when we consider the space of the novel as *ecological*, rather than simply geopolitical, we see that the novel unconsciously

envisions an underlying, already-existing ecological and interactive character of the islands, an interconnectivity of all life-forms and features of the environment that exceeds territorial power, that exists before, during, and after the slave uprising. If we read gothic fertility in Sansay's novel as ecological, then, what initially seems to be about restoring racial reproductive order to a disordered world becomes about recognizing a pre-existing reproductive ecology that is multi-dimensional, interactive, and transformable—that is not, in other words, contingent upon direct territorial domination.

Through Mary's narrative voice, Sansay's novel critiques Saint Domingue's reproductive landscape and idealizes its pre-revolutionary slave order. Yet the novel, despite itself, also hints at its own ecological character. By tracing the descriptions of fertility on the island, we see that the text harbors a *biopolitical unconscious*, a repressed and buried undercurrent of embryonic biopolitical discourse that resignifies Mary's descriptions of gothic fertility as reproductive ecology—an ecology that is not dependent upon the restoration of order and territorial power.<sup>5</sup> Although the novel does not take up biopolitics explicitly or develop a program for biopolitical regulation, the very fields of potential biopolitical intervention—particularly Michel Foucault's concept of the milieu—take shape in the descriptions of the island's environment and signal the ecological within the text. Borrowing from biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Foucault uses the term “milieu” to describe the multilayered character of biopolitical space, a site of interactive elements, of “rivers, marshes, hills, [...] of individuals, [and] houses”—that affect all living beings existing within it (*Security* 21). While a territory represents a legally bound space of dominion, the notion of the milieu reflects an ecological understanding of life and a “circular link” between causes and effects in an environment (21). Insofar as the novel engages with fertility and population issues, the space of the island transforms from a flat territory to a

heterogeneous hothouse, a collection of elements that are in constant transformation and movement. The biopolitical unconscious of the novel—far from emerging into a normative call for biopolitical regulation—constructs a milieu, a field that ultimately reveals the ecological character of fertility and space in Sansay's world.

My exploration of the novel's ecology is structured around three key terms: gothic fertility, biopolitical unconscious, and the milieu. I begin by examining moments of gothic fertility—those textual places where Sansay's narrator, Mary, seems to associate creole excess with reproductive disorder, widespread poverty, crime, and overpopulation. In this first section, I show how Mary, nostalgic for the imagined reproductive order of the slave economy, constructs a cause-and-effect link between the slave uprising in Saint Domingue and the perceived demographic problems in the West Indies. In the second section, I look beyond the narrator's gothic logic to posit for the novel a biopolitical unconscious that allows for the emergence of the ecological milieu within the text, one that challenges the narrator's desire for racial reproductive order and territorial control. In the third section, I identify what I argue is a crucial moment towards the end of the novel, a moment in which the text, despite itself, puts forth a vision of ecological order. This moment—in which a swarm of egg-bearing land crabs fiercely approaching the sea shore awakens Clara and her terrified companion—portrays a species whose fertility works in tandem with island topography. Finally, I employ this ecological reading to revise the more dominant geopolitical readings of the novel by connecting the land crab episode with the introductory scene, a scene in which creole citizens—forced from their homes by slave rebels—climb a mountain in suffering pain. In so doing, I locate and foreground the ecological milieu in one of the most geopolitically tense scenes in revolutionary Saint Domingue.

The oddly evocative land crab episode is helpful in understanding how the milieu functions in *Secret History*, not because the crabs represent a nature outside of such cultural artifacts as race warfare, crime, and poverty, but rather because they most explicitly exhibit an interconnectivity that can be read back onto the novel to reveal its implicit ecological character throughout. Although the land crabs might seem to represent the incursion of unadulterated nature into the novel, in my reading they make it possible to consider the ecological, rather than the natural, character of space and reproduction which is otherwise hidden in the text and unacknowledged in the criticism. I agree with Timothy Morton's claim in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) that "putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of the Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration" (5). Ecology, in this essay, is not meant to evoke a distanced, static, romanticized idea of nature but rather an interrelated series of processes and events that can deepen the way we conceive of space in the novel. Morton describes this ecology as a "*mesh*, a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the nonliving, between organism and environment" ("Queer Ecology" 275).<sup>6</sup> And I arrive at this ecology in Sansay's text—in the descriptions of gothic fertility and population disorder—through Foucault's biopolitical concept of the milieu, which encompasses everything from "marshes" to "houses" (*Security* 21). The ecological, in *Secret History* and beyond, need not be especially natural or earthy to be present and detectable. But in Sansay's novel, the land crabs' fertility most explicitly signals this otherwise buried milieu. And unearthing this milieu—as it exists throughout the novel—exposes the fallacy that a colonial slave system can restore reproductive order and recasts fertility as ecological rather than directly managed by colonial powers.

### **Gothic Fertility: Sansay's Creole Monsters**

The creoles of Sansay's West Indian world are gothicized, as either murderous monsters or victims of revolutionary violence and psychological turmoil. Indeed Sansay's writing is part of a literary corpus of Haitian Revolution narratives that adapt Old World gothic tropes to portray New World racial violence and political upheaval.<sup>7</sup> As Matt Clavin forcefully argues, writers in the early Americas deployed elements of the gothic tradition to sensationalize the Haitian Revolution as both horrifying and "unthinkable" (4). Throughout the novel, Mary discusses the sexual excess and moral degeneracy of the creoles, referring to them as "a degenerate race" who "have long since reached the last degree of corruption; devoted to every species of vice, guilty of every crime, and polluted by the continued practice of every species of debauchery"; the women in particular have "an air of voluptuous languor" and "libertinism...without restraint" (122, 126, 70).<sup>8</sup> The text's gothic character, however, stems not simply from the violence of revolutionary Saint Domingue but also from a subtler reproductive horror that permeates the entire region of the West Indies. Drawing from multiple literary traditions and colonial contexts, Sansay's novel portrays the creole as a gothic monster, hybrid colonial subject, and reproductive threat all at the same time.

Although *Secret History* defines creoles as "white inhabitants of European descent but born in the colonies," their role speaks to racial, sexual, and reproductive anxieties attending the revolutionary period as well as the slipperiness of the term "creole" itself (65).<sup>9</sup> Sansay's vignettes suggest that the degeneracy of the creoles is a product of their cultural hybridity, a status which threatens to morph into racial hybridity at a moment's notice.<sup>10</sup> And one gothic vignette in particular highlights the dangers of interracial sex and possible reproduction: In Cuba, Sansay's narrator hears the story of a creole woman from Saint Domingue, whose sexually

corrupt and wealthy husband—having retired with his mistress, “a woman of colour on whom he lavished all his property”—leaves her and her daughter to suffer “all the horrors of poverty” and “pains of want” (114). The woman’s daughter eventually catches a fever and dies, due to her husband’s economic and sexual neglect. This tale suggests that the creole lifestyle—elsewhere portrayed as a hybridity of Old World and New World customs—easily leads to interracial sexual excess, the consequence of which is poverty, disease, and death for his family members. Although Sansay’s novel pretends to restrict the term creole to white colonial subjects—effectively writing out free people of color—the gothic creole’s degeneracy stems from its potential for hybridity, a hybridity that threatens the potential breakdown of racial hierarchies through interracial sex, and ultimately, gothic fertility.

Implicit in the various gothic portrayals of the creole—ranging from daughters in sexual danger to knife-happy wives to lust-driven husbands—is their sexual licentiousness and overly reproductive body. Late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century accounts of the West Indies render creoles as rapidly reproducing in a chaotic, dangerous world of unmanaged resources, filth, and disease.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Sansay gothicizes the fecundity the creole population with descriptions of their over-sexed and thus overly-reproductive tendencies. Even within what appears to be a flattering description of benevolent creole life, fertility casts a dark shadow: “The Creole ladies, marrying very young, appear more like the sisters than the mothers of their daughters. Unfortunately they grow up too soon, and not unfrequently become the rivals of their mothers” (110). Here reproduction feeds into the jealous tendencies of the creole women, creating a circular loop between fertility and the gothic.

While gothic creoles represent the horrific threat of sexual and reproductive excess in revolutionary Saint Domingue, they also signal an impending demographic disaster of



overpopulation in the impoverished islands of Cuba. As the neighbors to revolutionary Saint Domingue, the novel's violent epicenter, Cuba and Jamaica are sites of social disorder, crowding, and overpopulation.<sup>12</sup> This portrayal reflects the thesis of political economist T. R. Malthus in *An Essay on The Principle of Population* (1798), that there is a permanent imbalance between a population's fertility rate and its resources. According to Malthus's apocalyptic ratios, the power of human fertility is permanently superior to the power of the earth to produce food, leading a population to continuously exceed its level of subsistence. Indeed, as Donald Worster points out in *Nature's Economy*, Malthus gave people reason at the end of the eighteenth century to call his new study of political economy "the dismal science," for it cast a gothic shadow on the human population, as it inevitably moves towards overpopulation, scarcity, and starvation (150).

Gothic fertility, then, gets relocated from narratives about individual excess in Saint Domingue to the Malthusian death of the population as a whole in Cuba. After Mary and her sister Clara migrate to Cuba, fleeing the wrath of French colonial leadership and revolutionary violence, Mary situates creole life within this narrative of overpopulation. She links gothic fertility to demography, describing the endless increase of the lower classes, beggars, and thieves that populate the streets of St. Jago:

To the licentiousness of the people, more than to their extreme poverty, may be attributed the number of children which are continually exposed to perish in the street. Almost every morning, at the door of one of the churches, and often at more than one, a newborn infant is found...The unfortunate little beings who happen to fall into the hands of the lower classes of the people, increase, during their childhood, the throng of beggars, and augment, as they grow up, the number of thieves (113).

Here Mary renders reproduction as a large-scale, uncontrollable force that arises from and generates immoral beings, rather than a series of individual moments of sexual excess. Sansay's narrator explicitly attributes the creole population issues to their "licentiousness"—their sexual license and subsequent neglect for their infants—as creating a world wherein miserable children line the streets of Cuban society. It is not "extreme poverty" that leads to more poverty, but rather overpopulation, an unstoppable force, that leads to more "licentiou[s]" creoles. The creoles' moral excess—their willingness to "continually expose" children to the world, and abandon them "at the door of...the churches"—represents the very pinnacle of gothic fertility. And the idea of an infant, "sometimes more than one," randomly appearing in the street constructs as a world of disorderly reproduction that gradually chips away at human life, foreshadowing, in the Malthusian narrative, eventual starvation and death. Here the high fertility rate, rooted in the moral degeneracy of the creoles, produces countless social ills; the streets of St. Jago de Cuba are swarming with unmanaged offspring.

This gothic description of creole fertility demonstrates a pervasive fear of illegitimate children, not only as future beggars and thieves but as potential products of miscegenation. During this time, illegitimate children were conflated with mixed-race children in legal and narrative discourses of miscegenation in the West Indies. As Doris Garraway argues, the discriminatory legislation in Saint Domingue figured free people of color as "the illegitimate children of white men and slave women" and attempted to quell anxieties about interracial sex and reproduction. In fact, the word "mulatto" became closely associated with ideas of illegitimacy and immorality in late eighteenth-century Saint Domingue. According to Garraway, "making illegitimate children taboo meant not only defining them in terms of immorality, concupiscence, and sexual savagery; it also meant making them forbidden, untouchable, and

unclean, capable of polluting white society” (32). Although Mary seems to remain silent on issues of race, her social commentary on creole fertility, poverty, and crime echoes this widespread terror of illegitimate children and interracial reproduction. Gothic fertility, in this sense, is both racist and Malthusian.

Mary’s account of overpopulated Cuba also conveys her nostalgia for what she imagines is an idyllic “garden” of slavery, a one-dimensional landscape of colonial dominion, reproductive order, and racial hierarchy. Ignoring the fact that Cuba is still a slave-holding country during this time, she upholds Saint Domingue’s slave system as the standard of order. In her account of Cuba’s poverty, hunger, and mismanagement of resources, she observes a “striking difference between this country and St. Domingo. There, every inch of ground was in the highest state of cultivation, and every body was rich, here the owners of vast territories are in the most abject poverty” (144). The narrator’s nostalgic description upholds pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue—a land where “every body was rich”—as the shining beacon of tranquility and prosperity, as the richly cultivated ground, the profitable garden to Cuba’s sinkhole of poverty, crime, and reproductive chaos. If Mary suggests that Cuba should aspire to emulate pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue, then she also implies that a return to slavery would quell the threat of overpopulation and racial mixing. In fact, earlier in the novel, Mary refers specifically to the slave system of pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue as a viable alternative to the unruliness of Cuba, echoing her nostalgia for the garden: “How different were the customs of St. Domingo! The slaves, who served in the houses, were dressed with the most scrupulous neatness, and nothing ever met the eye that could occasion an unpleasant idea” (112). Here Mary refers to pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue, to the seeming order and “neatness” of this version of slavery, as the favorable alternative to Cuba’s unregulated world. According to her logic, gothic fertility and

its attendant social problems can only be cured by the reinscription of slave-based colonialism in Saint Domingue. Gothic fertility, then, appears to be a symptom of the slave uprising; its disruption of racial hierarchy and colonial power causes widespread social turmoil throughout the West Indies, gesturing towards the reproductive threat of miscegenation, the permanent destruction of the fantasy of a well-ordered human-cultivated “garden.”

### **Biopolitical Unconscious: The Milieu Emerging**

Although Mary argues for a return to slavery by envisioning what she believes was once an orderly and well-managed system, a field of potential biopolitical regulation emerges in her very critique. This field looks less like the “garden” she imagines—a space of direct and meticulous control of a colonized territory based on slave labor—and more like an ecological milieu that exists beyond territorial power, that transforms and operates even as colonial forces and territorial control shifts. And despite the narrator’s insistence on a fantasy of the “garden” as reproductive order, the text, through its biopolitical unconscious, ultimately shows how the “garden” might also represent a deeper more ubiquitous gothic fertility, one that cannot be cured with slave-based colonial domination, one that remains embedded in ever-present, transformable ecology.

Mary’s account of gothic fertility—particularly when it becomes Malthusian—unconsciously signals an embryonic biopolitical discourse in the novel, wherein the milieu, as a potential object of biopolitical power comes into being. According to Foucault in *“Society Must Be Defended,”* biopolitics is a technology of power which focuses on life, “a technology which brings together the mass effects characteristic of a population, which tries to control the series of random events that can occur in a living mass, a technology which tries to predict the probability of those events...or at least to compensate for their effects” (249). This “series of random

events” is part of what Foucault defines as the “milieu” in *Security, Territory, Population*, the “certain number of combined, overall effects bearing on all who live in it” and “events produced by these individuals, populations, and groups and quasi natural events which occur around them” (21). Despite itself, Mary’s critique of creole society in Cuba, gestures towards the presence of a milieu and undermines her argument for a return to reproductive order through colonial control. In so doing, it constructs the population as a general mass that, in Foucault’s words, “cannot necessarily be counted,” according to Mary, St. Jago’s “unfortunate little beings” represent an uncountable “number,” signifying nothing but an “increase” and “augment” of degenerate forces and destructive tendencies ( “*Society*” 245, Sansay 113). In fact, the word “number” or “numbers” comes up countless times throughout the novel to refer to slaves, French soldiers, creoles, and most significantly, children, indicating a heightened awareness of demographic distribution. “Number[s]” evokes a collection of people, yet it withholds the exact quantity of a given group, functioning as a code word for population. Unconsciously taking shape in Mary’s accounts of gothic fertility, the population of *Secret History* is, in Foucault’s words, “biologically bound to the materiality within which [it] lives;” it exists within a milieu, a world of interactive elements and effects, of “infants,” “streets,” “beggars,” and finally, “thieves” (*Security* 21, Sansay 113). The high fertility rate, connected to the moral degeneracy of the creoles, produces not only social ills, but also the massive disorder of an unmanaged population affecting its environment. And these illegitimate children continue this cycle, creating what Foucault calls a “circular link” between causes and effects in an ecological milieu of transformable components. The biopolitical unconscious, despite the nostalgia for slave order in Mary’s narration, creates a milieu within *Secret History* that is fundamentally ecological, that helps us realize that the relation of the creoles—indeed all humans on the island—are interconnected with their

environment; it suggests that the Sansay's West Indian universe exceeds the purview of direct human territorial control and the imagined racial reproductive order of slavery.

As Mary and Clara travel farther away from revolutionary Saint Domingue, the milieu becomes increasingly apparent in textual moments of gothic fertility, complicating Mary's assumption that colonial power once provided reproductive order—an order disrupted by the slave rebellion and affecting all of the islands. The presence of the milieu implies a different narrative, one in which conflicting territorial interests—despite who might be in control—remain embedded in a mess of interrelations. And although gothic fertility might seem like a critique of unmanaged Cuban society, it also suggests a gothic—an uncontrollable untidiness of life, reproduction, and space—that cannot be so easily cured by the restoration of colonial power over a territory. For instance, in Clara's letter to Mary, after they separate, she provides an account of a woman she sees in her travels through Bayam, a town just outside of St. Jago de Cuba:

[Her] ragged garments scarcely answered the first purposes of decency. She was suckling a squalid naked child, and two or three dirty children were lolling about, without being disturbed by the appearance of strangers. A hammock, suspended from the roof, was the only article of furniture in the house...[she] went out to seek a seat beneath some trees; for the filth of the house, and appearance of its inhabitants filled [her] with disgust (143).

To Clara, the creoles, living in the “den of poverty,” fail to adequately manage their resources and fertility rate. The lack of furniture and clothing as well as the disorder of the unkempt children “lolling about” create a sense of unmanageable “filth,” chaos and potential destructiveness that reflects the unruly fertility of Cuba's dreadful morass. Here fertility is rendered gothic through the prospect of unmet need—the ever-looming Malthusian nightmare.

Clara underscores the lack of resources in the house; the mother may be feeding the “squalid naked child,” but the other “dirty children” appear to lack sustenance or purpose, unaware of their surroundings. This scene constructs creole life in Cuba as the stuff of overpopulation; crowding, dirt, chaos, and the potential disease and decay they all bring.

While Clara’s description warns against the dangers of creole fertility, the biopolitical unconscious of this scene constructs a milieu that interlinks causes and effects. While it remains unclear in this description if the “filth” of the house and the mother’s “ragged garments” are the cause of this dangerous fertility or vice versa, it is certain that these elements are all related in a dynamic environment of interactive components. Here the biopolitical unconscious of Clara’s description challenges Mary’s argument for a reinscription of colonial order; the components of this environment—the “filth,” the “children,” the “suckling” mother—are all interrelated, affecting and being affected one another. Such a portrayal of a milieu suggests that, in Sansay’s world, even in what might have seemed like pre-revolutionary reproductive order, the mess of ecology was still at work.

Clara’s assessment of creole life encompasses not only human fertility but agricultural fertility as well—except in the latter case, she laments what appears to be a dearth rather than a surplus. Creole poverty, in other words, is not merely the result of unmanaged fertility but also a sheer lack of agricultural cultivation on the part of landowners:

[...] the plains which extended behind the house were covered with innumerable herds of cattle...Incredible as it may appear, this miserable looking being, whose abode resembled the den of poverty, is the owner of countless multitudes of cattle, and yet it was with the greatest difficulty that we could procure a little milk. (143)

Clara attributes the abject condition of these creoles, then, to their inability to capitalize on their “countless multitudes of cattle.” Resources appear to be present, but remain unused and unmanaged; “wretchedness” and “poverty exhibited itself, surrounded by troops of cattle, who bathed in plains of the most luxuriant pasturage” (144). Here she also emphasizes what she sees as a weak, almost nonexistent form of agriculture in the area, remarking that “a small piece of ground, where [the owner] raises tobacco enough for his own use, was the only vestige of cultivation...Nothing like vegetables or fruit could be seen” (144). That the landowner Clara visits in Bayam grows “tobacco” instead of “vegetables or fruit” evokes the failure to produce sustenance for a population on a large scale. And instead of killing cattle en masse, the creoles “kill a beef, skin it, and cutting the flesh into long pieces about the thickness of a finger, they hang it on poles to dry in the sun; and on this they live till it is gone and kill another” (144). Disgusted with what she sees as an inefficient use of resources, Clara scoffs at the creoles’ absolute “unacquaint[ance]” with the “luxury” of bread and is alarmed that the cattle seem to roam free and the land remains uncultivated (144). Her critique reflects an investment in a Malthusian narrative of creole overpopulation, one which she shares with her sister, Mary.

Yet this narrative of overpopulation draws our attention to the island not simply as a territory of colonial dominion but as a milieu. Indeed, the biopolitical unconscious of the novel is at work here, countering the colonial logic of the supposedly ordered “garden” put forth by Sansay’s narrators. Formed in descriptions that forecast demographic disaster, Foucault’s biopolitical concepts of the population and milieu become discernible. The presence of these concepts in the novel do not so much develop into an explicit program of biopolitical regulation as they reveal the ecological, multi-dimensional character of the island, a space where precise reproductive order is nothing short of an illusion, and creoles—indeed all humans—are more



entrenched in their surroundings than they might think. The demographic possibilities of racial mixing or an imbalance between needs and resources become inevitable effects of a population at work. And the population, according to Foucault, exists within a milieu of circular processes and effects; it exceeds the meticulous order characteristic of a colonial slave economy based on controlled fertility, productivity and racial hierarchy. Just as the milieu becomes visible in the biopolitical unconscious of Mary and Clara's accounts, so too does it pave the way for an episode which depicts the reproductive ecology of land crabs in action, an episode which forces us to revisit the meaning of the gothic in gothic fertility.

### **Reproductive Ecology: The Case of the Land Crabs**

While Mary and Clara's descriptions of Cuban life put forth a Malthusian narrative of overpopulation, the biopolitical unconscious of these textual moments signals the ecological character of the island, recasting creole fertility as a changeable phenomenon rather than an unstoppable, destructive force. According to Worster, Malthus assumed that the fertility rate of a species was fixed, "as if it were a function assigned in the beginning...and kept constant under all conditions" (152).<sup>13</sup> Yet Mary and Clara's accounts complicate this idea; they unconsciously delineate Foucault's conceptions of the population and the milieu, both of which—far from ever becoming objects of biopolitical regulation—hint at the repressed ecological undercurrent in the novel. It is within this ecological context that gothic fertility takes on a different valence, not one of individual psychosexual turmoil or inevitable Malthusian apocalypse, but of a deeply enmeshed existence wherein the boundaries between human and nonhuman, organism and environment become terrifyingly blurred. This ecology emerges in the final pages of the novel, with Clara's description of the frightening and fertile land crabs making their way to the sea shore to shed their eggs.

Appearing just one page after Clara's critique of Cuban creole fertility—of both human reproduction and (lack of) agricultural practices—the episode of the land crabs provides a point of contrast: they seem to thrive in their fertility. Yet they also provoke a profound terror in Clara, different from the terror she feels when observing the creoles. The approaching land crabs awaken Clara with a “most unaccountable noise, which seemed to issue from all parts of the room, not unlike the clashing of swords” and her companion, who claimed that “a large cold animal had crept into her bosom, and in getting it out, it had seized her hand” (145). Clara's companion lets out a “shriek” that “increase[s] [her] terror,” and the two women are “frightened to death” by this nocturnal assault (145). At first glance, it seems that the women are merely surprised by the intrusion of these unknown “large, cold animals[s],” but even after they discover that these intruders are land crabs, their fear and awe remains. The crabs have a sound “like that of an approaching host” and Clara even remarks that “during the night their noise prevented me effectually from sleeping” (145, 146). She stays up to observe the migration of the land crabs, what “appeared like a brown stream rolling over the surface of the earth,” a swarm-like mass that inspires in her a horror deeper and more sustained than the horror she discovers in her revulsion to creole life. Their guide—protected by his own suspended hammock—informs the ladies that that this disturbance, is nothing a swarm of

land crabs, which, at this season, descend in countless multitudes from the mountain, in order to lay their eggs on the sea shore. The ground was covered with them, and paths were worn by them down the sides of the mountain. They strike their claws together as they move with a strange noise, and no obstacle turns them from their course... Towards the morning they gradually disappeared, hiding themselves in holes during the day. (145-6)

Although the text lends itself to metaphorical readings of the land crabs—Michelle Burnham and Michael Drexler have both pointed out that the “brown stream” of crabs could evoke images of black revolutionary masses in Saint Domingue—we would do well to read the crabs as crabs here, for they expose the ecological underpinnings of the novel. With unidirectional force and collective coherence, the land crabs—“rolling over the surface of the earth” in such “numbers” and “countless multitudes”—suggest a reproductive order that contrasts with creole fertility (145). Blanketing the mountain with an air of determination—indeed “no obstacle turns them from their course”—the fertile land crabs migrate to the “sea shore,” the connective tissue where land meets water, to shed their larvae. The topographical features of the island—the brackish “sea shore,” the slope of the mountainside, the inland holes for daytime “hiding” and burrowing—play a distinctive role in the existence of the land crab, particularly their reproductive patterns. The crabs use the landscape to perform their egg-bearing migration, affecting, even marking the land as they go, “cover[ing]” the ground, and wearing “paths...down the side of the mountain.” Thus does this scene of the fertile land crabs depict the island as a milieu of varying, intertwined, interactive elements. Although the reproductive ecology of the land crabs in Sansay’s novel appears neat and orderly, these elements can morph and cause the crabs to respond to their ecological circumstances. In fact, in addition to the topographical features that Clara identifies here, the land crabs’ reproductive ecology and breeding seasons are influenced by a range of environmental factors: lunar rhythms, high tides, climate, rainfall, water salinity, and anything else that crosses their path.<sup>14</sup> While Clara’s account does not cover the infinite factors that may impact the reproductive migrations of land crabs, it reveals that the creatures maintain a complex relationship with elements in the environment in order to thrive on the island. And while the creole population might cast a dark Malthusian

shadow over the entire West Indies for Sansay, the land crabs suggest that fertility is not a permanent, set-in-stone force of existence that demands colonial power to keep it in check. Rather, as Sansay's novel ultimately posits, life forms on the island exist as part of a milieu, and their reproductive patterns, among other biological processes, must be attuned to ecological circumstances—even the most minute or unexpected, like a sleeping woman obstructing a single land crab's route.

While *Secret History* does not explicitly articulate biopolitics as a regulatory technology of power—the land crabs' behavior appears instinctual rather than biopolitically regulated—its biopolitical unconscious reformulates what appears to be a human-dominated colonial territory as an ecological milieu. If we return to the opening scene of the novel with the scene of the land crab's reproductive migration in mind, we see a milieu emerge from what initially looks like a contested territory. In what appears to be a geopolitically tense moment, the rebel general at Cape Francois in revolutionary Saint Domingue commands the creole women to leave their houses—"the men had been taken to the plain the day before"—and as the general sets fire to the town, the fugitives flee their homes:

The ladies, bearing their children in their arms, or supporting the trembling steps of their aged mothers, ascended in crowds the mountain which rises behind the town. Climbing over rocks covered with brambles, where no path had been ever beat, their feet were torn to pieces and their steps marked with blood... They suffered all the pains of hunger and thirst... Large masses of rock were detached by the shock, which, rolling down the sides of the mountain, many of these hapless fugitives were killed... It is extremely difficult to find a lodging. The heat

is intolerable and the season so unhealthy that the people die in incredible numbers (62-63).

The creoles appear to represent a perfect inversion of the fertile land crabs. They “ascen[d]” rather than “descen[d]” the mountain, they are in flight rather than reproductive migration, and they appear to be acting within a context of war and territorial conflict—escaping the oncoming slave rebels who have seized control of the territory—rather than an ecological context. Yet these two unrelated scenes, taken together, reveal how the novel’s biopolitical unconscious functions underneath the geopolitical cover of territorial conflict to construct an ecological milieu. Like the crabs that carry their eggs on their back, the creoles “bear their children,” as heavy loads, perhaps even burdens, down the island. Just as the crabs grind their own pathways in the mountainside, so too do the creoles “clim[b] over rocks...where no path had been ever beat.” In fact, “large masses of rock” break off and roll down the same mountain, chasing and even killing some of the “hapless fugitives.” As they migrate, the creoles must interact with and respond to the same ecological elements as the crabs. They must brave the changing conditions of the landscape they traverse. Although at first glance this opening scene appears to operate as a seizure of territorial power, the description of the land crabs illuminates the scene’s ecological and potentially biopolitical elements: “the pains of hunger and thirst,” the difficulty in “finding a lodging,” the deadly diseases caused by “intolerable” heat and an “unhealthy” season, all elements that interact with and affect a population within a milieu—the uncountable “numbers of people descending the mountain”—a population, as Foucault writes, “biologically bound to the materiality within which [it] lives” (Sansay 62-63, *Security* 21). Every territory in question, every geopolitical conflict—including the seizure of Cape Francois—occurs in an ecological space wherein creole fugitives, indeed all humans, are but one of many entities at work.

Gothic fertility—in the case of the land crabs —does not dissolve into a benign reproductive-ecological order. Unlike the gothic fertility of Mary and Clara’s Malthusian portrayal of the creoles, the fertility of the crabs evokes a specifically ecological terror. Clara and her companion’s fear of the land crabs reflects what Simon Estok and later Matthew A. Taylor have identified as “ecophobia,” or the “contempt and fear we feel for the agency of the natural environment” (Estok 207). According to the logic of ecophobia, “nature becomes that hateful object in need of our control, that loathed and feared thing that can only result in tragedy if left in control” (Estok 215). The land crabs’ display of reproductive ecology appears so potent, instinctual, and massive—the “numbers” of land crabs are uncountable and seemingly infinite—that it strikes a deep terror, an ecophobia, in the hearts of the startled onlookers. It stirs in these women the feeling that the natural world—as much as it has been distanced in various descriptions of creole life “over there”—is in fact, as Taylor puts it, “fearfully near” (367).<sup>15</sup> Clara therefore reacts to the horrible ecological presence of the land crabs by allegorizing them as humans, attempting to control and distance them by elevating them as a symbol. Her abstraction of the land crabs is not unlike what Taylor describes as “the inevitable reflex of our fear that [nature] can destroy us; we, supposedly ontologically superior, must control or be controlled” (353). In her description, Clara codifies the crabs in terms of territorial dominance, writing them into a geopolitical narrative that flattens their actual ecological existence:

The English having some years ago made a descent on the island, had seized a Spaniard whom they found in a hut, and threatened to kill him if he would not shew them the way to St. Jago...In the night, they heard a noise stealing through the thickets, like that of an approaching host...The noise increasing on all sides, the English, fearful of being surrounded, embarked, ...prevent[ing] them from

becoming masters of the island, for the pretended host was nothing more than an army of these crabs (145-146).

Figuring the land crabs as colonial heroes, this representation reminds us of the persistent tension in the novel, between the island as geopolitical territory and the island as ecological milieu. In her ecophobic mythologizing of the land crabs, Clara imagines the island as territory; she indulges in the fantasy that the land crabs are but a symbol of Spanish colonialism in a geopolitical context. Such an attempt to dominate the land crabs—to distance them as a symbol that is no longer “fearfully near”—suggests that Clara sees them as a wild, threatening force of nature that must be resignified as heroic and geopolitically powerful, integrated into a colonial imaginary wherein humans are the only featured players. But ultimately, these crabs are neither villain nor hero; they are the awful and persistent reminder of a messy, entangled ecological world that makes no distinction between crab, creole or Clara. As Taylor aptly puts it, “fear of the environment exists, but it does not eventuate in mastery because both the fear and its uncanny source cancel the Cartesian distance between (and assuredness of) self and world” (364). Clara’s attempt at mastery through abstraction is similarly ineffective; the land crabs, at first glance, might appear to represent a pure and unadulterated nature “over there”—one which must be located within a geopolitical narrative—but ultimately, they represent an ecology that is everywhere. Clara and the land crabs are embedded in the same world, indistinguishable from one another.

Not only does this moment signal the tension between territory and ecology, it also demonstrates the limitations of a geopolitical model that conceives of the island as territory. “Canonized” as “an army” that defended its land, or rather Spain’s land—the anniversary still celebrated throughout the island—the crabs are understood as a myth of genuine colonial power

and military strength, despite evidence to the contrary (146). Their symbolic status originates from a misrecognition, from the British believing that the “approaching host” is “a body of Spaniards...preparing to attack them” (145). And although the crabs are widely celebrated as the heroes, their “noise” is not a battle cry to defend their homeland; their “clashing of swords” is but the sound of a culminating breeding season (145). This re-coding of the fertile land crabs as defenders of a colonial territory points to the very shortcomings of understanding land as territory rather than ecology; the allegory not only reduces the landscape to a one-dimensional stage where humans are the only actors, it is also based entirely on a misunderstanding that has colonial consequences. If anything, this story illustrates how the reproductive ecology of the land crabs affects colonial matters, how the geopolitical is also ecological. The land crabs, along with the British and Spanish colonizers, form part of an ever-present milieu that exists before and beyond the colonial history of Cuba, rendering the possibility of territorial order merely a fantasy.

Clara and Mary’s descriptions of gothic fertility consciously try to conceive of the island as a space of colonial power—a geopolitical entity—and human reproduction as a process to be managed by territorial powers. Such geopolitical conceptions of Sansay’s world—evident in the recent scholarship on the novel and in Clara and Mary’s narrative voices—focus on the multiple human forces vying for control of the land. Yet when we read Cuba and Haiti as ecologies rather than simply territories, Mary and Clara’s case for human colonial domination and reproductive control—however vague—loses ground. For their accounts also unconsciously construct the island space as a milieu of human and nonhuman entities, ultimately portraying the humans in the novel—Mary, Clara, and creoles alike—as no different from the land crabs, enmeshed in an ecology where the boundaries between self and world become hazy. What we find, ultimately, is



that these spaces—while geopolitically unstable in the midst of conflicting territorial interests—are always already multi-dimensional, interactive, and transformable, that the reproductive and ecological dimensions of the landscape exceed and escape direct colonial control and territorial power, that humans belong to a much deeper, darker ecological mess than even the strongest colonial power can handle. Creoles and land crabs are in the same ecological boat as rocks, hills, and huts. And fertility—whether seemingly ordered or not—forms part of the “circular link” between causes and effects in a milieu.

Gothic fertility, as the land crab episode shows us, looks less like territorial disorder and more like what Morton calls “dark ecology”—the “dark side” of ecological thinking, the “‘goth’ assertion of the contingent and necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world” (Ecology 184-185). Such an ecological terror stems not simply from conflicting colonial interests and race warfare, but from the realization that we are part of something vulnerable and interconnected, that our relation with the environment is not one of distance and hierarchy but of affiliation and interrelatedness. This ecology encompasses both the mess and order inherent in the image of the “garden” at the opening of the novel; in this context, we do not have to, in fact *cannot* choose between reproductive order and disorder in Sansay’s world, for the two are simultaneous in an ecological reading. And that is what makes gothic fertility truly terrifying.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Anglo-American writers deployed the metaphor of the “garden” throughout the nineteenth century to refer to prospective land conquests. See Matthew Pratt Guterl’s *American Mediterranean*, which argues that Southern slaveholders hoped to annex Cuba as a slave site, to “put this garden of Spain into our family group” (qtd in 23). Also see Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*, an account of the west as “the garden of the world,” and Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*. Sansay’s garden refers to a colonial past of both reproductive control and gothic libertinism.

<sup>2</sup> Recent critical accounts of Sansay take up the novel in the register of race, gender, colonialism, and genre (Dillon, Goudie, Armstrong and Tennenhouse, Wortendyke, Liu, Clavin, Burnham). All of these accounts are interested in describing the geopolitical context of the novel; for instance; Burham situates the text in a transoceanic capitalist economy, Goudie in what he calls the “paracolonial” role of the U.S. in the Caribbean, Armstrong and Tennenhouse in the “population” as a category that complicates national borders, and Liu and Dillon in how colonial histories intersect with the politics of race and gender. The ecological dimensions of the text have yet to be fully addressed.

<sup>3</sup> See Goudie, Armstrong and Tennenhouse, Woertendyke, Liu, Burnham. Goudie argues that “the novel foregrounds how, amid the chaos of revolution, U.S. American urban economies and merchants operate paracoloniaally to benefit themselves” (210). Woertendyke argues that *Secret History* is a hybrid genre of both history and fiction that adapts Old World forms in a New World context, complicating Elizabeth Maddock Dillon’s positioning of the text as an Early American novel.

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<sup>4</sup> This context of multiple colonial powers and territories includes France, revolutionary Saint Domingue, Spain, Cuba, Jamaica, and finally, what Gretchen Woertendyke has called “the vaguely utopist space of the Early Republic” (256). Mary longs to return to the idealized space of the early U.S. throughout the novel, and the story closes with the two sisters on their way back to Philadelphia.

<sup>5</sup> Here I am working from Fredric Jameson’s claim in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) that “it is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of the political unconscious finds its function and necessity” (20). The unconscious of the novel has a specifically biopolitical character that complicates and even conflicts with the surface interests of the text.

<sup>6</sup> In *The Ecological Thought*, Morton connects his concept of “*the mesh*” with his idea of the “*strange stranger*,” contending that each entity in the mesh “looks strange. Nothing exists by itself, and so nothing is fully ‘itself’” (15). For Morton, “the ecological thought imagines a multitude of entangled strange strangers,” life forms that shimmer with a weird unknowability. This is precisely what makes them ecological.

<sup>7</sup> Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, departing from Irving Malin’s 1962 study, redefines the American Gothic as a combination of psychosexual themes and historical and political horror. Teresa Goddu, in an even stronger revision of the American Gothic, underscores its deeply historical and political character, emphasizing, as Toni Morrison does, that it is a genre haunted by race. Matt Clavin’s essay provides examples of New World gothic monsters in Sansay’s world.

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<sup>8</sup> Such accounts of corruption echo other eighteenth-century descriptions of creoles, which attribute the men's brutality to their roles as slave commanders and the women's sensual indolence to their sedentary lifestyle. Doris Garraway notes that "writers and travelers consistently invoked the terms *libertine* and *libertinage* to describe the colonies as a space of immorality, religious heresy, violence, and sexual license" (25). Laurent Dubois draws on the work of Mederic Louis Elie Moreau de Saint-Mery and naturalist Michel Etienne Descourtilz, who "claimed that although creoles were born good and virtuous, they were corrupted by the fact that they were destined to command slaves"(34).

<sup>9</sup> The word creole originally referred to both blacks of African descent and whites of European descent born in the colonial Americas. Yet from the revolutionary period on, the dictionary definition of creole became more racially limited, referring only to whites in the nineteenth century. The term continued to refer to racial and cultural syncretisms, however, long after it took on this more racially narrowed meaning. See Doris Garraway's *The Libertine Colony* and Sean Goudie's *Creole America*.

<sup>10</sup> Tessie P. Liu argues that, while their European heritage emerges as an "attraction to power, luxury, and elegance," the creoles also imitate the slaves in their dress and their speech, wearing madras handkerchiefs and "speak[ing] with a drawling accent" (Liu 398, Sansay 20). It would appear that the novel's account of creole cultural hybridity is hyper-conscious of the possibility of racial hybridity.

<sup>11</sup> As Elizabeth Maddock Dillon contends, representations of creole life in eighteenth-century Saint Domingue tend to pair a discourse of wantonness with sexual excess, uncontrollable fecundity, and illegitimate reproduction (87). And eighteenth-century fictions constructed an idea of interracial gothic fertility that results in the sterile children. Edward Long,

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author of *History of Jamaica* (1774), and Moreau de Saint-Mery both believed that mixed-race children ended up sterile as a result of a “previous fertile liaison” between white men and black women (Garraway 271, 269).

<sup>12</sup> Historically, white creoles made up a small portion of the population in the West Indies. The population in 1789-90 estimated the number of slaves at around five hundred thousand, or eighty-nine percent of the population, while free people of color constituted five percent of the population. Of the thirty-two thousand whites that made up six percent of the population, only twenty-five percent were born in the West Indies (Liu 401). The fear of creole fertility that characterized accounts of the West Indies during this time was evidently exaggerated.

<sup>13</sup> Malthus did, however, influence island biogeography and Darwinian thought. See David Quammen’s *Song of the Dodo* (1996). Malthus also impacted the British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, who, like Darwin, recognized that Malthusian population-limiting “checks” also existed for nonhuman species, an idea that Malthus himself failed to consider (Quammen 109-110).

<sup>14</sup> See Warren W. Burggren and Brian R. McMahon’s *Biology of the Land Crabs* (1988) for a general account of the reproductive ecology of land crabs. The breeding behaviors of the land crabs are affected by everything from weather to road traffic patterns, affirming that even what seems like most unnatural element—a car—forms part of a milieu of ecological interactions.

<sup>15</sup> I use the phrase “over there” to invoke Timothy Morton’s argument in *Ecology without Nature* that a distanced and romanticized concept of nature perpetuates the idea that the environment is “That Thing Over There that surrounds and sustains us” (1).

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